

Weekly Market Bulletin

State of New Hampshire
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Lorraine S. Merrill
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From Your Commissioner...

Overcoming Obstacles—Local Ag Commissions, Extension Budgets

Stimulus money has come to the rescue of Strafford County for funding its share of the county office of UNH Cooperative Extension, Strafford County Conservation District, and numerous social service agencies. In the eleventh hour of a highly contentious budget process, county commissioners learned of the county's eligibility for an estimated \$1.1 million under the Federal Medicaid Assistance Program. The county administrator recommended using the money this freed up to fund all the previously cut agencies. A number of legislators worked hard to build support for these programs.

Strafford had the most combative process, but extension budgets have faced debate in other counties, too. All seven counties with a calendar fiscal year have now passed budgets supporting extension, reports John Pike, dean and director of UNH Cooperative Extension. "County extension advisory councils—our grass roots representatives—did an extraordinary job in making the case for supporting Cooperative Extension," he adds. Sullivan, Grafton, and Hillsborough have a July 1 fiscal year, but Pike anticipates support in those counties as well.

New Hampshire won't get federal stimulus money for programs like rural drug abuse prevention, according to state stimulus czar and Deputy Attorney General Bud Fitch, because our population numbers in relation to land area do not qualify as a rural state. No matter that we have significant regions that are rural by any definition.

With less than two percent of the U.S. population actively engaged in production agriculture, fewer and fewer people understand farming. The growth in population and affluence over the last 20 years or so in this state is both a boon and bane for agriculture.

Growth in direct market sales and higher-value farm products is the boon side. New Hampshire is third in the nation for direct market sales as a percentage of total farm receipts, and number one for percentage of farms reporting direct sales—nearly one in four farms in 2007. Our two most urban counties—Hillsborough and Rockingham—rank #37 and #38 among all U.S. counties in total direct market sales.

Many farms are sandwiched amongst subdivisions or adjacent to towns and cities, close to potential markets. But farmers also must contend with impatient drivers on the roadways, and complaints about noise, smells, and more regulations.

A local agricultural commission is one way to address these challenges, and build understanding and support for agriculture and local foods and products. Legislation supporting creation of ag commissions was passed in 2007. A number of towns have established commissions, and farmers and supporters in many others are in exploratory or organizing stages. A workshop for local ag commission organizers at this year's Farm & Forest Expo attracted over 70 enthusiastic participants.

We have heard from farmers in several towns about successful initiatives to pass ordinances establishing ag commissions, and we receive many inquiries from people wanting to know how many towns have formed commissions.

We would like to create a list of towns and cities that have established agricultural commissions. Please call or email Lynn at 271-3788 or Isearles@agr.state.nh.us to tell us about your town's agricultural commission, or efforts to establish one.

RSA 674:44-e Agricultural Commission. – *An agricultural commission may be established in accordance with RSA 673 for the proper recognition, promotion, enhancement, encouragement, use, management, and protection of agriculture and agricultural resources, tangible or intangible, that are valued for their economic, aesthetic, cultural, historic, or community significance within their natural, built, or cultural contexts. The word “agriculture” shall include the entirety of RSA 21:34-a, which is the definition of farm, agriculture, and farming.*

John and Sandy Salo of Marlow report that using the guidebook, *Creating a Local Agricultural Commission in Your Hometown*, helped them win town support in March. Find it under ‘Hot Topics’ on the department’s website <http://agriculture.nh.gov>

Lorraine Merrill, Commissioner